

Towards a self-service society

It appears, at least to some, that the 'post-industrial' society is not going to come after all. Among the many 'strange things' that are happening in most advanced Western economies, one deserves a very special consideration: there is an actual decline in services bought by households and a parallel increased investment of households in durable goods.

Daniel Bell's society, in which the quality of life would be measured by the services and amenities, and where the third sector, that is personal services, would grow apparently without limits, does not seem to be coming to pass. Similar prophecies of Kahn, Galbraith, Schumacher, Dahrendorf, etc., are likely to share in the failure of this particular prediction.

So what is happening?

- Goods are becoming cheaper, more plentiful, more useful and versatile. Services are growing more and more expensive while the quantity and quality of services is often actually decreasing.

- The growth of public sector, social services, government and the military requires heavier and heavier taxation. But there is a limit which the political constituencies are willing to tolerate. Then they revolt; a "proposition 13 society" emerges, demanding a forced devolution of some public services.

- Public services sector reaches limits to its growth: decreasing productivity, higher prices, lower demand. The industrial sector continues to maintain its high productivity growth rates through introducing labor-saving technology, better organization and better skills. Unemployment grows. But also the unemployment benefits do, and so do the taxes.

- Employees' unrest, strikes, job actions and heavy unionization are shifting from coal miners, steel workers and automobile workers, to teachers, transportation workers, sanitation engineers, policemen and hospital employees. Their wages must stay in step

with those of the industrial workers. Consequently, both prices of the services and taxes must go up. Inflation grows.

The future of advanced societies lies not in the provision of services and amenities, but in the provision and consumption of even more goods. The need for services, however, is not going to disappear. It will have to be met — more cheaply, more efficiently, and more reliably — by *self-service*.

What are the conditions for self-service activities to occur on a large scale? First, more *time* — there is going to be more of it in the future; four-day work-week is becoming a reality for an increasing number of employees. Second, more and cheaper durable *goods* which would provide the necessary support for an effective self-service — we are at the threshold of a new industrial revolution, characterized by automation, intelligent electronics, and computerization. Third, more *energy* — as the advanced nations finally turn towards decentralized and renewable energy sources, the ones which are extremely suitable for self-service, the energy question will be resolved in the market place, independently of the governmental strategic planning and political decision making.

Of course, the growing prices of services, growing taxation, and relative cheapening of durable goods are effectively fueling the transition toward self-service society in the meantime.

The term and the concept of self-service were first invented by Skolka, independently elaborated by Gershuny in his *After Industrial Society?*, but also arrived at by Kochen, Marien, and others. Is this group of new prophets going to be more accurate in their assessment of emerging societal trends? That remains to be seen.

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In the future this item will appear in front of each issue.